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## The Humanitarian Gaze and the Spectatorial Nature of Sympathy

Michelle Assaad

University of South Florida, michelle.assaad17@gmail.com

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The Humanitarian Gaze  
and the Spectatorial Nature of Sympathy

by

Michelle Assaad

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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Major Professor: Steven Roach, Ph.D.  
Bernd Reiter, Ph.D.  
Holly Matthews-Dunn, Ph.D.

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## **DEDICATION**

Lovingly dedicated to Amal Hussain and Alan Kurdi,  
and the children of Yemen and Syria.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Ansel Adams, one of the world's great photographers, once said, "There are always two people in every picture: the photographer and the viewer." This thesis will explore the relationship of the photographer, the viewer, and the photographed subject in the context of humanitarian photography, which has historically internalized a specific balance of power between the worlds of the photographer, viewer, and subject. By examining this tangible expression of the internalized world, this thesis is also performing a critical examination of humanitarianism itself with the intent of improving humanitarian practices and interior worlds. In examining these topics, this thesis will answer the following questions: What is the humanitarian gaze? And: Why is the spectatorial nature of sympathy reserved for Global South? These are questions that will lead to the core question that this thesis asks: what is the relationship between humanitarianism and colonialism?

## INTRODUCTION

Ansel Adams, one of the world's great photographers, once said, "There are always two people in every picture: the photographer and the viewer." As a photographer myself, this has always been the great allure to photography for me. I have always been interested in how people's perception of the world comes to shape the world they live in. Specifically, I have always been interested in the perception of others through the lens of the self, and how the relationship between the photographer, the viewer, and the subject can shape the world.

This thesis will explore this relationship in the context of humanitarian photography, which has historically internalized a specific balance of power between the worlds of the photographer, viewer, and subject. By examining this tangible expression of the internalized world, this thesis is also performing a critical examination of humanitarianism itself with the intent of improving humanitarian practices and interior worlds. In examining these topics, this thesis will answer the following questions: What is the humanitarian gaze? And: Why is the spectatorial nature of sympathy reserved for Global South? These are questions that will lead to the core question that this thesis asks: why is there a relationship between humanitarian photography and colonialism?

The relationship between photographer, viewer, and subject can be a complicated one steeped in power dynamics that stem from the colonial era. The viewer

of the photograph ends up seeing the world as the photographer does, quite literally from their point of view. The viewer sees the photographer's reality as they have been taught and conditioned to see it. The viewer, removed from the material world of the photograph, is not really seeing the subject objectively, but, rather, a materialized view into the photographer's internal world. As such, all photography is not objective but, rather, is heavily subjective.

Photography can be seen as a tangible and external expression of the internalized world of each photographer which is made up of their culture, customs, social norms, power structures, histories, and their individual personalities.

The relationship between the photographer, viewer, and subject does not always have to be political or based in power dynamics. However, in humanitarian photography the relationship between photographer, viewer, and subject, is particularly asymmetrical.

Humanitarianism and photography emerged onto the world stage in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. This unwitting relationship makes it ripe for examination. Their emergence came about in unison, at a time when imperialism was at its height, and acted as a backdrop and guide to enable each other's evolution and cementing each other's role in world history and culture. The problem is that colonialism instead of fading away has remained firmly ingrained in the Western mind, even in the mind of humanitarians whose central tenant is the liberal ideology of equality and dignity for all.

This thesis will explore the relationship between photographer, viewer, and subject while specifically focusing on the subject of humanitarian photography, As



previously mentioned, the fact that photography and humanitarianism grew in tandem in the age of imperialism plays a major role in humanitarianism and in humanitarian photography, specifically in its ability to inspire sympathy and the desire for social action in modern audiences. This thesis will establish the relationship between the colonial gaze and humanitarian photography in several ways. First, it will historically establish the bleeding of colonialism into humanitarianism. Secondly, it will trace the evolution and rise of humanitarianism while contrasting it to the decline of colonialism. By doing so, it will establish new social and international norms as well as codified law. Thirdly, using photographic archives and an interpretive approach, this thesis will examine humanitarian photography of the Global South by Western photographers from the late nineteenth century and contrasting it with contemporary humanitarian photography. The purpose of this is to see if the imagery and the gaze has evolved or if it has remained static. It will then compare these humanitarian campaigns from the Global South to humanitarian campaigns with similar themes in the Global North. This thesis will explore the idea and argue that the colonial gaze has become ingrained as a social and international norm that has not left the Western perspective even with the simultaneous rise and consecration of humanitarianism as a social and international norm as well as codified law in the form of the Geneva Convention and various international humanitarian organizations such as the Human Rights Watch, International Rescue Committee, and the United Nations.

To answer the questions and issues above, this paper will employ both a constructivist theoretical approach as well as a postcolonial theoretical approach.

The constructivist theoretical approach is especially inspired by Emanuel Adler's "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics." In it, Adler argues that "constructivism is the view that the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on dynamic normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world."<sup>1</sup> By using constructivism to explain the current state of political power in photography, this paper argues that the internal mind worlds are reflected in the external world of historic and modern humanitarian photography, and thus, not only reflect the firm hold of colonialism in the world and its ideologies but serve to quietly and subconsciously to perpetuate these subconscious ideologies until they have become normative behaviors even in this liberal age.

In the article, Adler outlines the social and cognitive structures that form the basis of constructivism in international affairs. These structures, from micro to macro levels, are transferred to the world stage in the form of norms and world politics. Adler further expands upon constructivism and says:

Even our most enduring institutions are based on collective understandings; that they are reified structures that were once upon a time conceived ex nihilo by human consciousness; and that these understandings were subsequently diffused and consolidated until they were taken for granted. Moreover, constructivists believe that the human capacity for reflection or learning has its greatest impact on the manner in which individuals and social actors attach meaning to the material world and cognitively frame the world they know, experience and understand. Thus collective understandings provide people with reasons why things are as they are and indications as to how they should use their material abilities and power.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Emanuel Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics," *European Journal of International Relations* 3, no. 3 (1997).

<sup>2</sup> Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics."

What is important to stress from this excerpt in the context of this paper's argument is that human consciousness created understandings ex nihilo, or from nothing, and that "these understandings were subsequently diffused and consolidated until they were taken for granted."<sup>3</sup>

Viewing the world and its various layers of realities from this constructivist lens, lends itself to the core arguments made in this paper and to the views of the world, its politics, norms, cultures, ideas, and individuals. All thoughts of self, of others, of life are not one's own but are simply a product of "knowledge and social factors"<sup>4</sup> that form and are made up of humanities stratigraphy.

The postcolonial theoretical approach for this thesis is inspired by the various writings of scholar, Edward Said. The work that will feature most prominently is Said's 1978, *Orientalism*, which is considered as the "founding pillar of postcolonial studies."<sup>5</sup> By using postcolonialism to examine and explain the power relations between the photographer, the viewer, and the subject, this thesis is, in effect, calling into question and materializing the lingering colonialism that still exists between the photographer, viewer, and subject.

Postcolonialism examines the lingering effects of the colonial experience and views the world from a lens in which colonialism is not simply an event that exists in the past, but one that has continued in a different form. Postcolonialism examines the politics of representation, how people and their cultures are represented, and who it is

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<sup>3</sup> Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics."

<sup>4</sup> Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics."

<sup>5</sup> Tariq Jazeel, *Postcolonialism* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

that has the power to construct the associated cultural narratives.<sup>6</sup> It is in this asymmetrical power dynamic that the tension between the former colonizers and colonized exists in the present reality. It is within this tension that postcolonialism examines and explores the existing narratives and attempts to replace them with their own, decolonized narratives. The power to narrate events, cultures, and history remains firmly grounded within the world of the West, therefore silencing the various realities, experiences, and truths that exist in the world beyond. This power dynamic is a direct remnant of the colonial legacy.

In *Orientalism* as well as in *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, Edward Said describes the construction of social narratives and argues that these narratives become ingrained and shape reality. These constructions are passed through academia, the media, and through various forms of entertainment. The construction of “the other” by the West what Said refers to as orientalism. Said argues that the Western constructed narrative of “the other” comes to shape not only the minds of those in the West, but that these same narratives also come to shape reality itself.<sup>7</sup> This is an argument that is central to this thesis. In Said’s article, “Permission to Narrate,” Said argues that this power to narrate has historically rested with the West and that the West has concerned itself with the task of constructing, absorbing, sustaining, and circulating these negative cultural narratives.<sup>8</sup> This, of

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<sup>6</sup> Jazeel, *Postcolonialism*.

<sup>7</sup> Carl Olson, "Politics, Power, Discourse and Representation: A Critical Look at Said and Some of His Children," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 17, no. 4 (2005).

<sup>8</sup> Edward Said, "Permission to Narrate," *Journal of Palestinian Studies* 13, no. 3 (1984).

course, implies that colonialism is still very much present in the modern interior and exterior world, an argument that this thesis maintains.

This thesis is heavily influenced by an interdisciplinary literature that encompasses the disciplines of international affairs, history, anthropology, media studies, legal studies, philosophy, and photography, which touch upon the subject at hand. Yet, upon a review of the current literature available, I found that there is a gap separating humanitarian photography from humanitarianism's powers and norms, the current power of humanitarian photography, and the lingering colonial gaze and social norms.

Many scholars have addressed the individual pieces that this thesis will attempt to connect, but few have connected them all. This paper will thus seek to connect humanitarianism and colonialism. This connection can be seen and is made tangible through humanitarian photography, a material expression of the interior world.

Michael Barnett traces the rise of humanitarianism from a localized ideology to a codified law but fails to make note of the clear influence of colonialism in the modern rendition of humanitarianism.

Karen Halttunen describes the spectatorial nature of sympathy as a sympathy, and therefore as an action, that is driven by visual stimulus. Susan Sontag addresses this often graphic and violent visual stimulus and describes it as the morbid nature of humanity. Yet, this morbid nature of humanity seems to be one sided, as will be demonstrated in the third section of this thesis. Barbie Zelizer addresses this issue and

argues that this morbid nature is certainly not symmetrical, but rather, is reserved for those of the Global South.

Susan Sontag is the authority on the subject of political photography. Her two major works, *On Photography*, 1977, and *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 2003, both relate her ideas about the role of photography, as material objects but also as ideas in culture and politics through reflective and theoretical essays. Sontag discusses the tangible and intangible ideas and importance of photography and the challenges of outsider, objective and subjective documentary photography, or a genre of photography that aims to truthfully and objectively reflect the everyday lives of ordinary people to other ordinary people,<sup>9</sup> in conflict zones.

On the subject of the power of political photography, Sontag has much to say. Though acknowledging that photographs are a reliable political tool in the instance of propaganda, she seems far more doubtful as to photograph's role in mobilizing citizens to meaningful action. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, she describes various responses to photographs of atrocity: "Photographs of atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen."<sup>10</sup>

It is in this sustained look downward that a relationship between the two worlds exists. One world, that of the viewers reality, has no seeming overlap into the world of the photographed. Rather, the only intersection of the two worlds are the photographs

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<sup>9</sup> David Bate, *Photography: The Key Concepts* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador Press, 2003).

that have existed in the past, the present, and will exist in the future. The subject of the photographs, the location, the culture, the depiction, and the construction of life all leads to the “other-ing” of this second, or third, world. It is in this constructed intersection, in this asymmetrical power dynamic, in this lifelong representation and resulting narrative of the “other” that this paper will attempt to explore and fill.

## CHAPTER 1: HUMANITARIANISM AND COLONIALISM

### Introduction

This chapter of the thesis will begin by outlining the important variables of the constructivist approach. It will then trace the emergence of humanitarianism from its roots as a Western social norm into an international codified law through a historical analysis. This paper will then conclude with an examination of colonial era humanitarianism as well as the current state of humanitarianism.

### Humanitarianism as an Individual and International Norm

The questions raised by this thesis will be examined using a constructivist approach as well as a postcolonial one. In order to answer the questions, individual pieces must first be addressed. This section of the thesis will examine the rise of humanitarianism from a localized philosophical and religious belief into an international norm. To do this, the specific constructivist theoretical framework of this thesis must first be untangled in order to set a solid foundation for the arguments moving forward.

Norms are here defined as the standard of acceptable behavior for an actor who forms part of a group.<sup>11</sup> This acceptable behavior is found in shared beliefs, whether

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<sup>11</sup> Robert C. Ellickson, "The Evolution of Social Norms: A Perspective from the Legal Academy," in *Social Norms*, ed. Michael Hechter and Karl Dieter Opp (New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 2001).



they be moral, causal, factual,<sup>12</sup> or artificially constructed. The formation and legitimization of these shared beliefs and facts are validated through human agreement and compliance.<sup>13</sup> These behaviors and beliefs shape the physical reality for individuals belonging to that group.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, as beliefs and facts change, physical reality changes fluidly from one form into another. This is why past behaviors and beliefs may be seen as outdated or wrong to the modern social reality, when in their time they were seen as not only acceptable but desirable. Surely, as humanity evolves and new belief systems emerge, certain aspects of the current social reality and behaviors will be seen as outdated or irresponsible. The reason that they are not seen as such now the modern social reality is blind to them. This is a belief held by many in the social sciences who claim that cultural insiders may not be the best to study their own culture, but rather it should be cultural outsiders who should do so because they are not conditioned, and therefore not blind, to the constructed reality or belief systems of that particular culture.

Norms can exist at an individual level and also at a social level. There is a debate within the constructivist literature regarding the individual and social origins of human actions.<sup>15</sup> While social importance will remain unquestioned in this thesis, the importance of individual behavior and compliance to emerging norms, especially, but also to ingrained norms will be expanded upon briefly.

Norms can undoubtedly emerge at the individual level, but they can also be constructed at a social level. Colonial social norms, for example, are top-down norms

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<sup>12</sup> Ellickson, "The Evolution of Social Norms: A Perspective from the Legal Academy."

<sup>13</sup> Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics."

<sup>14</sup> Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics."

<sup>15</sup> Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics."

that began in centralized government and then through careful and purposeful construction of “us” and “them” became cemented at the individual level.

There are four main actors in normative emergence: change agents, actors, enforcers, and members of the audience.<sup>16</sup> The change agent can be seen as the individual who begins the normative change. In the case of Western Humanitarianism this can be traced back to Latitudinarianism which set the foundation for the conviction of the human responsibility to not only be sympathetic to the pain and suffering of others but also to the responsibility of those who can contribute to relief to actually contribute.<sup>17</sup> The role of the actor is to adopt these patterns of behavior and belief systems.<sup>18</sup> The normative enforcer can be seen as social pressures that lead to individual praise or negative sanctions like ostracization or something as simple as a judgmental glare.<sup>19</sup> The final actor is the member of the audience who watches and learns from the interaction between the actor and the enforcer.<sup>20</sup> Theorist Robert C. Ellickson argues that “norms arise when enforcers, to please their audiences, administer informal sanctions to influence the behavior of actors.”<sup>21</sup> An audience member might watch the interaction between the actor and the enforcer, learn what the appropriate behavior is, act upon that appropriate behavior in another setting and therefore switch roles and become the enforcer when the situation arises. In the emergence of social norms, one

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<sup>16</sup> Ellickson, Robert C. “The Evolution of Social Norms.”

<sup>17</sup> Karen Halttunen, "The Pornography of Pain," *The American Historical Review* 100, 2 (1995).

<sup>18</sup> Halttunen, "The Pornography of Pain."

<sup>19</sup> Halttunen, "The Pornography of Pain."

<sup>20</sup> Ellickson, "The Evolution of Social Norms: A Perspective from the Legal Academy."

<sup>21</sup> Ellickson, "The Evolution of Social Norms: A Perspective from the Legal Academy."

can assume that the behaviors begin as largely performative behaviors in order to acquire positive gains.

The movement and evolution from individual to international norms, therefore, follows the same behavioral patterns and roles as on the microlevel: change agent, actor, enforcer, and member of the audience. States, whether they believe and embody the norm or not, acquire positive gains by at least performing the norms. For example, states that have signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) are perceived as states who have embodied the human rights norm. Yet, upon further examination of the signatories of the UDHR one can see that numerous signatories have not truly embodied the norm since they are notorious and constant human rights abusers. Therefore, a reasonable conclusion can be reached that the state actors felt pressure from norm enforcers to at least publicly perform the normative behavior of being signatory without fully embodying the norms.

### **The Emergence of Humanitarianism**

Western Europe was rapidly evolving in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Many of the ideologies that have come to define the modern social reality and international world order have their origins firmly set in this time period and place.

The main topic of this thesis is modern humanitarian photography and its power. Yet, the topic does not exist in isolation and is indeed influenced by various variables that define how it is that the photographs are constructed not only by the photographer, but also by the viewer.

In order to explore this relationship between the photographer, viewer, and subject there must first be a historical analysis as to how humanitarianism came to be, how humanitarianism and colonialism came to have a relationship with each other, and their place in the modern world in relation to humanitarian photography. To do this, I begin my constructivist historical analysis in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe – during the emergence of humanitarianism and photography, with the ever looming, and often conflicting and contradictory shadow of imperialism – the catalyst that brought about liberalism in its early form and as it currently exists. In order to examine humanitarianism, its roots in early liberalism must first be found.

Liberalism has had an interesting ideological journey. Emerging in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, it came about in direct opposition to the existing economic, mercantilist system that was perpetuated by the monopolistic power of the East India Company and enforced by the English government through restrictions, customs, and laws.<sup>22</sup> At the time, the system in place heavily restricted individuals who were not part of the East India Company (EIC) from profiting from the global trade that had emerged through England's colonial projects.<sup>23</sup> The EIC was a chartered company that enjoyed two things: first, the control of trade from Asia to South America, effectively, all of the British colonial holdings; secondly, the rights that it was granted by the English government combined the right to monetary, warring, and ruling control.<sup>24</sup> Anybody

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<sup>22</sup> Gareth Knapman and Mary Quilty, "Mapping Liberalism and Empire in Southeast Asia," in *Liberalism and the British Empire in Southeast Asia*, ed. Gareth Knapman, Anthony Milner, and Mary Quilty (New York: Routledge Press, 2019).

<sup>23</sup> Knapman and Quilty, "Mapping Liberalism and Empire in Southeast Asia."

<sup>24</sup> Philippa Levine, "The British Empire: Sunrise to Sunset," (London: Routledge, 2007).

outside of the EIC, was effectively pushed out of the global economic system since. These restrictions served to further advance inequality in an already incredibly unequal system. Therefore, liberalism emerged as an economic ideology that was not only founded in democratic and egalitarian ideals, but also one that was initially critical of British expansionism.<sup>25</sup> It can be argued, that the reason for this initial critical view of British expansionism was become of economic alienation.

Liberalism and humanitarianism can be seen as emerging and evolving together, dependent and leaning on each other for validation and support. Not only in the past but also in the modern world. Indeed, humanitarianism is one of the five parts of liberalism's main themes. Certainly, the two cannot be detangled from one another historically or currently. They emerged and rose together as sister ideologies, spreading through the world hand in hand. It follows, then, that colonialism is their dominating parent. It continues, even in the modern context, to form part of their foundation and subconscious.

Though the origins of humanitarianism can be traced back thousands of years, through numerous civilizations, cultures, religious and social traditions, this tale will pick up the thread shortly before the transformation of humanitarianism from a social norm into a codified international agreement in Europe. This thesis is centralized on Western agents of humanitarianism and their relationship to the rest of the world, though it does recognize that there are other agents of humanitarianism with their own distinct histories and traditions. By concentrating on the emergence and evolution of

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<sup>25</sup> Knapman and Quilty, "Mapping Liberalism and Empire in Southeast Asia."

humanitarianism in the Western tradition, the questions of this thesis can be answered in a succinct fashion. Though, I do wish to assert that the Western world is certainly not the only agent or sole proprietor of humanitarian sentiment, aid, tradition, or codification.

The first phase of humanitarianism came about as a codified law in 1863 with the signing of the first Geneva Convention.<sup>26</sup> This came at a time when England (until that point, the leader in humanitarian philosophy and culture), France, Spain, and numerous other European powers held colonial lands and ruled over millions of colonial subjects. Indeed, at the signing of the Geneva Convention, British Imperialism was at its height, with over 10 million square miles of land and over 400 million colonial subjects under their rule.<sup>27</sup> That humanitarianism, concerned with the wellbeing and compassion for the pain and suffering of others, usually in foreign lands,<sup>28</sup> and colonialism, often brutal, and at the very least degrading, as the root cause of pain and suffering in the foreign other, ran in stark opposition of one another and grew alongside, has not been lost to many but has been an area of study that has remained oddly undeveloped.

Since 1863 there have been numerous waves of humanitarianism, which will be broken down into three main groups: classical, neo, and current. Since 1863 there have also been thousands of humanitarian organizations created, as well as humanitarian domestic and international laws, and even wars with cited humanitarian purposes, as

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<sup>26</sup> Kurt Mills, "Neo-Humanitarianism: The Role of International Humanitarian Norms and Organizations in Contemporary Conflict," *Global Governance* 11, 2 (2005).

<sup>27</sup> Levine, "The British Empire: Sunrise to Sunset."

<sup>28</sup> Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2011).

contrary as that may sound. As humanitarianism dominated the world stage, official state colonialism withered away, now to be seen and named as a cause of so many issues in the modern world.

Before the codification of humanitarianism, it existed as a social norm for at least a century with its roots in religious belief. Though charity and compassion have existed for thousands of years as a centralized religious tenant, what marks humanitarianism as isolated from religious charity is its concern for those in foreign lands and being part of an official organization dedicated solely to humanitarianism.<sup>29</sup>

Humanitarianism, like so many other norms, began its life as a religious belief that can be traced back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century Latitudian conviction that sympathy is a natural human state and that it is the responsibility of those who can alleviate the suffering of others to contribute to the alleviation of suffering.<sup>30</sup> This belief spread from individual actors closely associated with the movement to social reality. This social belief can be examined after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, which forced thousands of French Protestants to seek refuge in England.<sup>31</sup> This was then cemented and evolved into the overall culture of sensibility, which cast those who were compassionate as civilized and those who were cruel as savage.<sup>32</sup> By extension, especially with colonialism as a backdrop to this historical period, being civilized was

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<sup>29</sup> Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*.

<sup>30</sup> Halttunen, "The Pornography of Pain."

<sup>31</sup> Abbey, Charles J., and John H. Overton. *The English Church in the Eighteenth Century*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1878.

<sup>32</sup> Halttunen, "The Pornography of Pain."

equated with being superior, not only to those who were cruel, but also to those who were in need of relief.<sup>33</sup>

This may sound like a conflicting lens from which to view the world. It gets worse. Humanitarianism, as one of the main themes of early liberalism, was in conflict with another of liberalism's themes: that of race.

Liberalism was mostly concerned with economic success; indeed, it is still married to it. Yet, it is obvious that economies are tied and implicated with social themes and realities, and that British colonialism was not so much about extending modernization and infrastructure to the world, but rather about economics. The economic and exploitative policies of the British empire were justified with a questionable humanitarian logic. Liberalism said that the British, and by extension, Europeans, were racially superior, and this meant that they were at an advanced stage of civilizational evolution. Therefore, it was their duty to protect and civilize those of different races because they were innately inferior.<sup>34</sup> Consequently, when the EIC went into decline in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, was officially taken over by the British government in 1858,<sup>35</sup> and the market was open to free trade, liberalism was firmly on the side of colonialism for the economic and social benefits that it afforded to the British.<sup>36</sup>

This constructed superiority and culture of sensibility also created a moral obligation that seems to exist to this day. Those who had and have the means to help

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<sup>33</sup> Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*.

<sup>34</sup> Knapman and Quilty, "Mapping Liberalism and Empire in Southeast Asia."

<sup>35</sup> Ruth, Michael. "East India Company." In *Salem Press Encyclopedia*, 2018.

<http://search.ebscohost.com/proxy.lib.usf.edu/logdirect=true&db=ers&AN=87321916&site=eds-live>.

<sup>36</sup> Knapman and Quilty, "Mapping Liberalism and Empire in Southeast Asia."



others in need, generally do, whether this be due their own convictions or due to performative aspects remains to be examined at the state level.

Historian Karen Halttunen argues that this culture of sensibility was spectatorial in nature, and that sympathy was best evoked by seeing, either in reality, in art, or in the mind's eye.<sup>37</sup> In modern reality, this spectatorial nature remains, with photography being one of the most powerful tools for humanitarian organizations. This will be further discussed in a later section of the thesis.

This shift in social norms can be seen in multiple ways. Halttunen argues that one such way to see this social transformation is through sentimental literature which "emphasized emotional response rather than rational judgement."<sup>38</sup> Popular and celebrated authors of the time such as Charles Dickens, Emily and Charlotte Brontë, as well as Jane Austen, had constant humanitarian themes throughout their body of literature that allowed for their readers to see into the lives of others through their minds eye. Often, these "others" were vulnerable protagonists who existed in sharp and obvious contrast to their cruel antagonists. In the case of Jane Austen, whose work reflects social interactions, her body of literature can be shown to demonstrate desirable and undesirable social qualities and behaviors as well as humanitarian themes. That the authors and their works were well celebrated in their time can be seen as an acceptance of the norms as the idealized and desirable attitude towards those others less fortunate.

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<sup>37</sup> Halttunen, "The Pornography of Pain."

<sup>38</sup> Halttunen, "The Pornography of Pain."

This shift can also be seen at an institutional level in the way of reforms to the penitentiary system, to the treatment of the mentally ill in state asylums, and to the treatment of animals and children.<sup>39</sup> Michael Barnett observes that this period also saw the emergence of organizations whose sole purpose was the relief of suffering, first mostly in their communities, but then this relief was spread to those in foreign lands.<sup>40</sup> Barnett argues that these rapid social changes were facilitated by intellectual technologies, global markets, and modernization.<sup>41</sup> Barnett continues his argument by saying that

Political, social, and economic forces were breaking down existing political communities and encouraging individuals to envision new forms of solidarity and responsibility that were at a greater social distance.<sup>42</sup>

This sudden proximity to others through the emergence of technologies allowed for two things: a glimpse into the lives (and suffering) of others, and the reactionary attitudes of charity and early classical humanitarianism. The term humanitarianism was first used during this time and place. Humanitarianism was used as a term that was

concerned with the benevolence toward humanity as a whole, with human welfare as a primary good” and was used to designate someone who advocates action for such ends.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Halttunen, “The Pornography of Pain.”

<sup>40</sup> Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*.

<sup>41</sup> Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*.

<sup>42</sup> Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*.

<sup>43</sup> Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno, *Humanitarian photography : a history*, Human rights in history, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015). Book review (H-Net) <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=46501>.

Though there had been more than a century of humanitarian social norms in European countries prior to 1863, and already a humanitarian anti-slavery campaign, with roots in liberalism,<sup>44</sup> the official birth date of international humanitarianism comes alongside the foundation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Henri Dunant, the Swiss founder of the ICRC, was a direct actor in the English culture of compassion and liberalism, having spent his early adulthood promoting and establishing the London-based Christian charity, Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), in his native Switzerland.<sup>45</sup> It was his firm foundation in charity and Christian compassion in his familial, personal, and professional life that motivated Dunant to write about a horrific battle that he had come across during his travels in Italy.<sup>46</sup> It was this scene that inspired him to call for "improved care for wounded soldiers in wartime"<sup>47</sup> in the form of charitable societies that would go into battle to care for the wounded soldiers.<sup>48</sup> In his memoir of the battle,

he proposed an international convention to grant special protection to the wounded and those caring for them, whether uniformed or civilian. This network of charitable relief societies would: help save lives; stimulate Christian principles of charity and giving; nurture among the common people a respect for those wounded or killed in battle, no matter what uniform they wore; and stimulate ideals of civilized society.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*.

<sup>45</sup> "Jean Henri Dunant." In *Encyclopedia of World Biography Online*, 1998.

<http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/K1631001922/BIC?u=tamp44898&sid=BIC&xid=89602379>.

<sup>46</sup> Mills, "Neo-Humanitarianism: The Role of International Humanitarian Norms and Organizations in Contemporary Conflict."

<sup>47</sup> Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*.

<sup>48</sup> Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*.

<sup>49</sup> Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*.

In turn, this led to the Geneva Convention, which codified and established humanitarian organizations such as the ICRC as neutral, impartial, and independent of states and their wars.<sup>50</sup> This has also been called as the establishment of emergency humanitarianism. Thus, began the age of classical humanitarianism which lasted from 1863 to the end of WWII.<sup>51</sup>

During the period of classical humanitarianism, relief efforts did not take on the same form as they do now. With the backdrop of colonialism, relief beyond the borders of the colonizing state and into the colonized state did not look like foreign aid, but rather, like localized aid.<sup>52</sup> The colonial subjects were framed as “fellow subjects” who naturally destined to lives of suffering were it not for the British, who were there to relieve them of such suffering.<sup>53</sup> By framing the colonized as their own fellow subjects, this opened a space and opportunity for a deeper level of humanitarianism that could have been found locally.

This constructing of the foreign as a fellow subject does not exist today. Rather, the rhetoric exists on an international level with calls for aid calling for the saving of humanity (general) but not of our fellows (individual). There has been a distinct division created: us and them. This division has come to be a defining characteristic of humanitarianism through all of its phases: concern for one’s own over the concern for

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<sup>50</sup> Mills, "Neo-Humanitarianism: The Role of International Humanitarian Norms and Organizations in Contemporary Conflict."

<sup>51</sup>Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism.*:

<sup>52</sup> Fehrenbach and Rodogno, *Humanitarian photography : a history.*

<sup>53</sup> Christina Twomey, "Framing Atrocity: Photography and Humanitarianism," in *Humanitarian Photography: A History*, ed. Heide Fehrenbach and David Rodogno (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

“the other”. Michael Barnett argues that it is not necessarily need that determines who receives aid from individuals and private organizations, but rather, identity.<sup>54</sup> This is particularly the case with individuals still, and organizations prior to the second world war.

### **Colonial Humanitarianism**

Until this point this thesis has been a historical analysis that has traced the evolution of humanitarianism from a religious belief to a moral sensibility to a codified norm consisting of European, Christian states. Constructivism says that the internal world shapes the external world. The internal world of Henri Dunant and the four other founding members of the ICRC, who were all part of an elite society, told them that Christian Europe was the height of civilization, and as the members of the civilization that it was their duty to civilize others. This echoed the liberal ideology. This also echoed colonial mentality. Their internal narrative and ideas of themselves were that they and all other European Christians were superior in all ways to the rest of the world. They also existed in an interior and material world of ingrained social norms, specifically that of humanitarianism, charity, and compassion. These two ideas, innate superiority and humanitarianism, still exist today, on the individual and the social levels, though in a different form. It can therefore be reasonably claimed that colonialism has a firm grip on humanitarianism.

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<sup>54</sup> Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*.

Humans are social beings who transmit information to one another for survival, to form bonds, and for a variety of other evolutionary reasons. An individual human cannot acquire all the knowledge that is needed for survival on their own, communities are needed. Thus, a great deal of information that individuals have does not come from themselves but, rather, is second-hand. Even a new innovation or idea that is developed in isolation has a solid foundation in second-hand knowledge and would not have been possible without it. Humanitarianism, for example. The same can be said for interpretations of reality and interpretations of others and of the self. Edward Said calls this communities of interpretations and describes it as the knowledge that is readily circulated and accepted in these communities as experience that is

Selected by stereotyped meanings and shaped by ready-made interpretations. Their images of the world, and of themselves, is given to them by crowds of witnesses they have never met and never shall meet. Yet for every man these images – provided by strangers and dead men – are the very basis of his life as a human being...Every man interprets what he observes – as well as much of that he has not observed: but his terms of interpretation are not his own.<sup>55</sup>

Rather than being their own knowledge, though it would appear to be, this is the process of knowledge building where singular ideas grow to be accepted as the norm and exist in the material world.

In the context of photographic depictions of “the other” this always has roots in politics that grow and become accepted as unconscious knowledge to be unconsciously

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<sup>55</sup> Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

and continually passed on from the micro to the macro and from the macro to the micro. In the modern context, the passing of this knowledge is made much quicker by the cultural apparatus of mass media that includes the news, social media, entertainment, radio, national symbols, and historically, as Edward Said demonstrated in *Orientalism*, academia, as well.<sup>56</sup> Said says that this cultural apparatus “constitutes a communal core of interpretations providing a certain picture...but also a communicable set of feelings about the picture”<sup>57</sup> that have been constructed through history and passed down. These feelings can be exploited as the political need arises.

In the case of these seemingly conflicting practices of humanitarianism and colonialism, they have a common core: superiority. Neither colonialism nor humanitarianism could exist without feelings of ingrained and natural superiority. It is this superiority that lends itself to paternalism, and exploitation. Though the colonial era might be over, there are still remnants of the colonial mentality that exist and can be made tangible in the colonial gaze that exists in liberal era humanitarian photography.

The next section of this thesis will first begin with a discussion as to what colonial era photography is and how it was used by examining two government sponsored photographic campaigns into Egypt and Palestine. It will then discuss the depiction of suffering in humanitarian photography. It will then use humanitarian photographic campaigns from the colonial era to the liberal era of both former colonies

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<sup>56</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

<sup>57</sup> Said, *Orientalism*.

and former colonial states as empirical data to show, in a tangible way, that the colonial gaze and the colonial mentality has bled into humanitarianism.

### **Neo and Current Humanitarianism**

Neo humanitarianism, which began after the second world war and lasted until the end of the Cold War, brought about many changes to humanitarianism. Treading through a new world stage with a new and delicate balance of power, on the heels of two world wars, unprecedented death, refugees, rampant illness, starvation, and the reconstruction of nearly all of Western Europe...Humanitarianism had no choice but to adapt in the face of the new world and it's many new humanitarian challenges.

Liberalism, instead of evolving, remained static in its ideology of universal individual economic rights, humanitarianism, and dignity.<sup>58</sup> Though, as will be later demonstrated, this norm has been speaking louder than it has been acting.

The first of the changes was humanitarian impartiality.<sup>59</sup> This meant that organizations no longer provided aid based on identity, but rather, on need, whether that be to "us" or to "them."

The second change was in the professionalization of humanitarian organizations.<sup>60</sup> Prior to the Second World War, humanitarian organizations were mostly private, religiously motivated, and were largely made up of untrained, but well-meaning volunteers. The sheer size and need of the world after the war required

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<sup>58</sup> C. William Walldorf, "When Humanitarianism Matters: Liberalism and the Termination of Strategic Commitments," *Security Studies* 14, 2 (2005).

<sup>59</sup> Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*.

<sup>60</sup> Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*.



foundational restructuring and organization. With this came the introduction of expertise knowledge and utilization of modern technology and equipment, like coordinated and designed photographic humanitarian campaigns.<sup>61</sup> Expertise knowledge provided for several things: organization, professionalization, coordination, and structure, certainly, but also to further widen the divide between those who needed help and those who helped, especially so outside of Western Europe.

This need for organization and coordination created a space for governments to act with and within humanitarian organizations for various reasons. One of such reasons was that humanitarianism became more popular within the public. Given the sight and tangibility of extreme cruelty, especially after the release of the photographs of the concentration camps, all citizens and states must have wanted to further the divide between civilized states and cruel states. This can be seen not only in role that states began to play in humanitarian organizations but also in the creation of international organizations and the establishment of international law and the rise of the liberal world order which stressed diversity, inclusion, liberty, and equal rights. This, of course, can be seen as a result of yet another layer of intentional and reactionary distinguishment: capitalism vs. communism.

However, it should be mentioned that Kurt Mills argues that this central defining feature of neo and the still evolving, contemporary humanitarianism, is not purely from the goodwill and humanitarian normative behavior of states. Mills and others argue that many states use their relationship with humanitarian organizations to further their

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<sup>61</sup> Fehrenbach and Rodogno, *Humanitarian photography : a history*.

own interests and to comply with humanitarian norms in a performative manner. This is a pessimistic world view that is not entirely unwarranted nor is it provocative. It can be tested in several ways. Mills says:

The most powerful states in the world, which frequently feel pressure to “do something” and intervene in instances of genocide and other humanitarian crises, attempt to use humanitarian actors to show that they are responding to a crisis while not actually doing much at all... Thus, humanitarian aid becomes a strategy for political containment rather than problem solving.<sup>62</sup>

The United States of America gives the most money to foreign aid. In 2017 it gave nearly \$44 billion.<sup>63</sup> This is far more than any other country did and more than any country has ever given. Yet, under closer examination, this number amounts to 0.177% of the United States gross national income.<sup>64</sup> In 1970, the United Nations recommended that “each economically advanced country will progressively increase its official development assistance to the developing countries and will exert its best efforts to reach a minimum of 0.7 per cent of its gross national product.”<sup>65</sup> Judging by the agreement, the “International Development Strategy for the Second United Nations Development Decade,” none of the P5 reached the 0.7% goal in 2017.

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<sup>62</sup> Mills, "Neo-Humanitarianism: The Role of International Humanitarian Norms and Organizations in Contemporary Conflict."

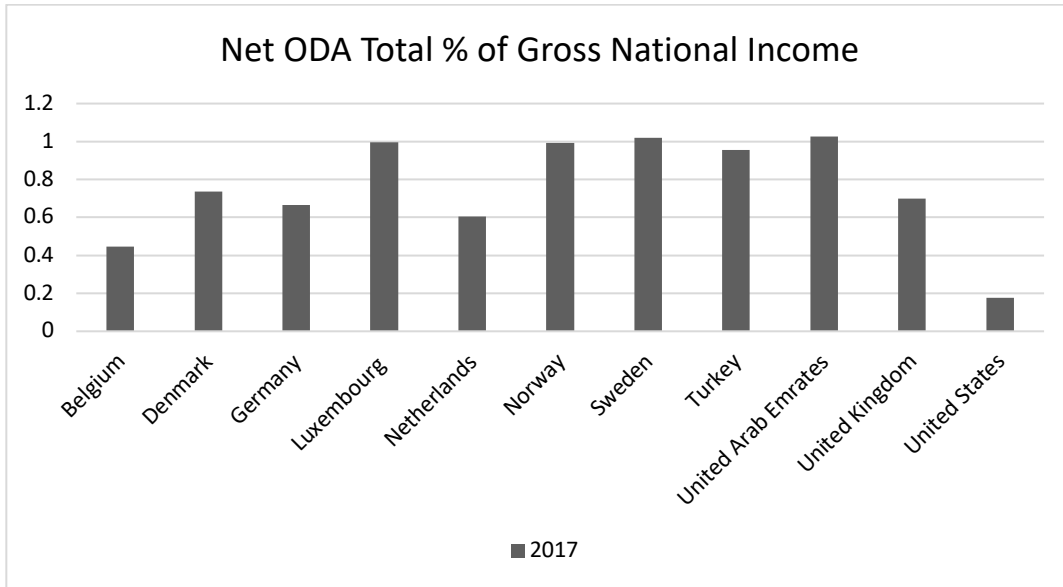
<sup>63</sup> USAid, "FAE: Trends," ed. USAid (2019). <https://explorer.usaid.gov/aid-trends.html>.

<sup>64</sup> OECD, "Detailed aid statistics: ODA Official development assistance: disbursements," in *OECD International Development Statistics (database)* (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1787/data-00069-en>.

<sup>65</sup> United Nations, *International Development Strategy for the Second United Nations Development Decade*, (1970).

Using this standard to determine which country was the most generous in 2017, I found that it was the United Arab Emirates who gave more than 1% of their gross national income.

*Table 1. Net ODA Total % of Gross National Income from the OECD*



To put it into further perspective, in the same year, the United States of America’s budget for the Department of Defense was \$606 billion.<sup>66</sup> It should be noted that the amount of US foreign aid dropped by 43% in 2018 to about \$29 billion<sup>67</sup> despite it being a year of intense humanitarian need and emergency, with situations continuing in Syria and Yemen, and new situations developing in Latin America. The budget of the Department of Defense jumped up to \$612 billion in the same year.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Office of Under Secretary of Defense Chief Financial Officer, Defense Budget Overview United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2019 Budget Request, (2018).

<sup>67</sup> USAid, "FAE: Trends."

<sup>68</sup> Officer, Defense Budget Overview United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2019 Budget Request.

Humanitarianism is in a new phase where it is still trying to determine its identity. Since 1990, humanitarianism has taken on a life of its own which has included numerous wars with humanitarian purposes, interventions, and new norms, like R2P. Mills argues that this new phase of humanitarianism has lost the core principles which first shaped the movement – neutrality, impartiality, and independence – and has moved away from its founding behaviors of delivering material aid to those who needed it because of its entanglement and dependence on state funding.<sup>69</sup> He continues by saying that humanitarianism “is now as much about public relations as it is about helping people, is often used in the service – either directly or indirectly – of foreign policy goals and wartime objectives.”<sup>70</sup>

Yet, this does not mean that humanitarian organizations and humanitarianism has lost its power. On the contrary. Mills continues his argument by saying

CNN and the Internet bring pictures of starving, brutalized people into our homes on a daily basis, tugging at that core of humanity inside of us. NGOs use global telecommunications to great effect to publicize human rights and humanitarian norms, to put pressure on states to follow them, and to put a spotlight on situations where these norms are violated. The quest of IHOs for funds through media publicity may not only raise money, but may also raise the salience of an issue. As a result, the so-called CNN effect can, in certain circumstances, push states – particularly Western, democratic states – to respond.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Mills, "Neo-Humanitarianism: The Role of International Humanitarian Norms and Organizations in Contemporary Conflict."

<sup>70</sup> Mills, "Neo-Humanitarianism: The Role of International Humanitarian Norms and Organizations in Contemporary Conflict."

<sup>71</sup> Mills, "Neo-Humanitarianism: The Role of International Humanitarian Norms and Organizations in Contemporary Conflict."

Humanitarianism is now in its third phase. In many ways, this might be the most complicated phase simply because of the fact that the world is now more connected than ever. Anyone can be a humanitarian; anyone can be a humanitarian photographer. The Global North and Global South once separated spatially has now found itself closer than ever, it's people more connected, and ideas more intertwined. This phase of humanitarianism brings the rise of the everyday, casual humanitarian who has access to equipment that could only have been accessed by those who constructed the truth. Now, the truth can be constructed and perpetuated by all. Justice can be looked to for all and past constructs can be perpetuated by all.

The first two phases of humanitarianism can be seen as establishing the humanitarian norm in the social, professional, and legal spheres. This latest phase of humanitarianism should demonstrate a true engrainment of the humanitarian and liberal norms at the individual and international levels. However, this is not the case. Kurt Mills and others argue that many states use their relationship with humanitarian organizations to further their own interests and to comply with humanitarian norms in a performative manner. Yet, the fact that they are complying with humanitarian norms signifies the existence and importance of the humanitarian norms. The performative aspect of following the humanitarian norms demonstrates the importance and desirability of such norms at the individual and social levels.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter of the thesis served to trace the rise of humanitarianism alongside colonialism. From this, one would expect that negative colonial imagery would decline through time and be replaced by positive depictions of need. There should exist an inverse relationship. However, because it has been argued that colonialism has bled into humanitarianism and that humanitarianism has not become ingrained into social norms but rather, is a performative behavior, I expect to find a static colonial gaze in humanitarian photography. The next section of the thesis will examine the colonial gaze, suffering, and what makes for a successful humanitarian campaign.

## CHAPTER 2: COLONIAL AND HUMANITARIAN PHOTOGRAPHY

### Colonial Photography

In this chapter I will be examining the use of photography as a tool of colonialism as well as how colonials used photography for their own humanitarian purposes.

While humanitarianism was emerging upon the world stage as a vital and unifying force in 1863, photography was taking its first steps as an independent entity away from the shadow of painting and gaining its own identity as a mechanicalized, therefore, objective, depiction of reality.

By 1863 photography had been an important cultural apparatus for nearly forty years. Bestowed with the myth of objectivity due to its realistic depictions of life, photography had been a colonial tool since its conception. Colonialists used photography as a way to empirically show their superiority over their subjects and to justify their humanitarian presence in “savage” foreign lands.

Unlike past depictions of reality and truth, photographs carry an additional weight that was previously non-existent in past human depictions of reality: that of visual truth which can be understood as verification of reality through sight.<sup>72</sup>

Photographs have traditionally not left a space for the questioning of experiences,

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<sup>72</sup> Julian Hickerson Newton, *The Burden of Visual Truth: The Role of Photojournalism in Mediating Reality* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2000).

existences, or of certain events. Photographs have been seen as mechanically reproducing “the world as perceived by the corporeal eye”<sup>73</sup> without human intervention. In other words, photographs have historically acted as a verification tool socially and even legally.

Susan Sontag, author of *On Photography* and *Regarding the Pain of Others*, defines a photograph as a personal testimony that can be used to define, construct, and appropriate realities.<sup>74</sup> This definition, albeit more theoretical than material, is a constructivist definition that awards photographs their due power to shape outside reality through an interior, oftentimes, unconscious reality, and expression of culture. Again, the interior world affects the material world.

That culture is a tangible and intangible expression of present and past lived realities, and that photographs have been proven to be a tool for truth (whether that be the real truth, or a shadow of it, or something entirely separated from it), opens up a space for the intentional construction of alternate versions of reality and can create false narratives of the past, present, and of the future. This is what gives photographs its power: blind trust that the photographer is as mechanical as the camera.

For most of photography’s existence since 1827, it has enjoyed the status of the ultimate truth, without leaving consideration to the constructionist frame, or the idea that truth and reality can be constructed implicitly or subconsciously by the operator of the camera, by the viewer of the photograph, or by the context in which the photograph

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<sup>73</sup> Newton, *The Burden of Visual Truth: The Role of Photojournalism in Mediating Reality*.

<sup>74</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Rosetta Books, 1973).



is presented.<sup>75</sup> Anthropologist Margaret Mead best described this troubling blind spot in the historic and innate trust in photographs by saying: “Even a video camera set on a tripod to record automatically has to be pointed in a particular direction that includes and excludes certain information.”<sup>76</sup>

This exposure of “instant, realistic, “eyewitness” accounts of people and events throughout the world”<sup>77</sup> opened the era of photography as a tool of truth and as “a covert artist with an acute social conscience.”<sup>78</sup> These views into the lives of others, opened a space for humanitarian campaigns. They also opened a space for the normalization of conflicts in certain global regions, mostly former colonial states, for the domination of pictorial narration by colonizing states, and for the constructed cultural narratives and realities that led to very real international relations and resulting actions allowed by public opinion.

One of the very first photographic expeditions commissioned, albeit not a humanitarian campaign, was the French sponsored trip of Maxime Du Camp and novelist Gustave Flaubert to Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and Greece in 1849.<sup>79</sup> These countries, it should go without saying, were all seen inferior to the Christian European states. This expedition demonstrates the qualities of colonial imagery, mentality, and Western interests.

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<sup>75</sup> Newton, *The Burden of Visual Truth: The Role of Photojournalism in Mediating Reality*.

<sup>76</sup> Newton, *The Burden of Visual Truth: The Role of Photojournalism in Mediating Reality*.

<sup>77</sup> Newton, *The Burden of Visual Truth: The Role of Photojournalism in Mediating Reality*.

<sup>78</sup> Newton, *The Burden of Visual Truth: The Role of Photojournalism in Mediating Reality*.

<sup>79</sup> Beaumont Newhall, *Photography, 1839-1937* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1937).

Colonial imagery exists in a wide variety of forms but is most clearly seen as the visually depicted stereotypification of others as exotic, primitive, inferior, untouched by globalization, passive, general, and disempowered.<sup>80</sup> This depiction served as a way to “to construe the colonized as a racially degenerate population in order to justify conquest and rule.”<sup>81</sup> This negative depiction comes in stark and sometimes blatant contrast to the depicted superiority of the Westerner. Oftentimes, in colonial photography, the colonizer and the colonized stand side by side as though to further stress their physical differences. After an examination of a wide range of colonial era photographs, a pattern was found. Often, the colonizer stands with a straight back and looks directly into the camera with confidence and power. The colonized, on the other hand, is often depicted as sitting, looking into the camera uncomfortably in their native dress (or in the case of females, sometimes not dressed at all), or looking outside of the frame at something that we, the removed viewer, can only imagine.

For most people in Europe and the Americas, the series of 125 images by Du Camp and Flaubert was their first real-life glimpse into the outside world. In this case, the material world served as a validation of their interior world.

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<sup>80</sup> Terri A. Hasseler, "The Promise of Tourism: Colonial Imagery in Advertising," *Radical Teacher*, 82 (2008).

<sup>81</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The post-colonial studies reader. [electronic resource]* (Routledge, 1995), Bibliographies

Non-fiction

Computer File.

<http://ezproxy.lib.usf.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cats00847a&AN=usflc.025471440&site=eds-live>.

[http://www.usf.eblib.com/EBLWeb/patron?target=patron&extendedid=P\\_169955\\_0&](http://www.usf.eblib.com/EBLWeb/patron?target=patron&extendedid=P_169955_0&).

At the time of the photographic expedition of Du Camp and Flaubert, Egypt was at a very precarious political point and can be seen as already caught in the net of colonialism and foreign involvement. To present Egypt and the Egyptians in the way that they did, as a regressive culture much in need of modernization, was to the advantage of the colonizers in order to gain popular support for their eventual colonial projects. To present Egypt in such a way was to open the discussion of Egypt as a civilizing, or humanitarian, project.

Du Camp and Flaubert took images that show ancient cultures, peasant life, crumbling ruins, and presented a blunt contrast between the East and the West. This intense contrast of cultures, coupled with a fantasy of “the other”, is what Edward Said describes as “orientalism”<sup>82</sup> and perfectly fits into the colonial narrative and imagery of “the other.”

At the time that Du Camp and Flaubert traveled to Egypt, there was an Orientalist Renaissance, a period where British and French citizens and “soldiers discovered “the East” anew.”<sup>83</sup> Thus, it is hardly a coincidence that Du Camp’s and Flaubert’s trip was entirely sponsored by the French government.<sup>84</sup> Though taken and documented freely by two highly educated and enthusiastic Orientalists themselves, their knowledge came from French sources that only perpetrated the romantic, colonial, and stereotypical narrative of the Middle East as a land of ancient ruins, destruction, backwardness, temptation, other-ness, and stressed European superiority over foreign

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<sup>82</sup> Said, *Orientalism*.

<sup>83</sup> Said, *Orientalism*.

<sup>84</sup> Ali Behdad, "Mediated Visions: Early Photography of the Middle East and Orientalist Network," *History of Photography* 41, no. 4 (2017).

cultures. In the case of Du Camp and Flaubert, their positionality as European citizens in relation to the subjects of their photographs can be clearly seen in the images.

Therefore, their resulting narrations and photographs were not “merely the intentions of the individual actors who produced [the images] but the overlapping systems and politico-cultural relations” between the French and the people of Egypt and by extension, the people of the Islamic Middle East<sup>85</sup> and the world outside of Europe. The images that they took can openly be seen as representing the Middle East through an “imperialist lens and actively contributed to France’s colonial projects in the region.”<sup>86</sup> Of such phenomenon Said says, “Western representations of the Orient, no matter how well intentioned, have always been complicit with the workings of Western power. Even those Orientalists who are clearly sympathetic of Oriental peoples and their cultures cannot overcome their Eurocentric perspective, and have unintentionally contributed to Western domination.”<sup>87</sup>

Indeed, it would have been startlingly difficult for Du Camp and Flaubert to produce anything but a reification of the already existing cultural narratives and colonial mentality since knowledge production is completely dependent on the positionality of the producer, which is produced by the context of their existence: their culture, country, social position, etc. The construction occurred in Palestine when

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<sup>85</sup> Behdad, "Mediated Visions: Early Photography of the Middle East and Orientalist Network."

<sup>86</sup> Behdad, "Mediated Visions: Early Photography of the Middle East and Orientalist Network."

<sup>87</sup> Wang Yufeng, "The Cultural Factors in Postcolonial Theories and Applications," Article, *Journal of Language Teaching & Research* 9, no. 3 (05// 2018), <https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.0903.26>, <http://ezproxy.lib.usf.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eue&AN=129672704&site=eds-live>.

British photographer to the Queen, John Cramb, went to Palestine to conduct his own photographic expedition of the Holy Land on behalf of the British government and for the British people.<sup>88</sup> These photographs constructed a narrative of Palestine as a land of emptiness, largely because Cramb and many of Cramb's contemporary photographers "thought that their buyers would resent having their photographs of important sites being desecrated by the inclusion of Arabs, Turks, and Jews" who actively lived in the region.<sup>89</sup> This emptiness and backwardness that was a constant feature in colonial era photography, might have opened a space for British colonialism and humanitarianism in the next century.

When examining imperial humanitarian photography there are several striking features. The first is that it follows colonial imagery perfectly. This is not surprising given that the photographs were taken during the height of colonialism by western photographers. They were blind to their own perspective and took photographs of the world and its people in relation to their own positionality and how they saw them. The second is that the suffering depicted is raw as it is gruesome. In imperial humanitarian photography, nothing is held back.

This is a defining characteristic of humanitarian photography in general. The purpose of humanitarianism is, after all, to alleviate suffering. As mentioned earlier, historian Karen Halttunen has argued for the spectatorial nature of sympathy which says that sympathy is best evoked by sight, whether that be by seeing suffering in real

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<sup>88</sup> Behdad, "Mediated Visions: Early Photography of the Middle East and Orientalist Network."

<sup>89</sup> Issam Nasser, "'Biblication' in the Service of Colonialism: Jerusalem in Nineteenth-Century Photography," *Third Text*, 3-4 (2006).

life, through photographs, or through the imagination.<sup>90</sup> Photographic depictions of suffering were thought to be superior to the written word or sketches that might have appeared in newspapers and magazines of the time in that they could validate the claims of suffering and make tangible the lives of others.

Humanitarian photography had unintended consequences. Christina Twomey says that photography was able to do two things: bring the viewer and the subject closer by constructing the existence of the colonial subject to the removed European citizen, but it was also able to stress their distances and differences.<sup>91</sup> It served to further emphasize European superiority and place additional pressure on an already decidedly asymmetrical power system. Henrietta Lidchi describes this as both voyeurism and control: the powerful taking photographs of the powerless suffering.<sup>92</sup>

Modern humanitarian photography follows these same standards of the colonial visual economy. Why is this? Historian Karen Halttunen argues that it is because human innately enjoy seeing others suffer and calls this the pornography of pain. Susan Sontag argues likewise. Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno say that depicting suffering in campaigns is necessary to elicit the reactions needed. However, Barbie Zelizer raises an interesting point: all suffering is not equal.

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<sup>90</sup> Halttunen, "The Pornography of Pain."

<sup>91</sup> Twomey, "Framing Atrocity: Photography and Humanitarianism."

<sup>92</sup> Henrietta Lidchi, "Finding the Right Image: British Development NGOs and the Regulation of Imagery," in *Humanitarian Photography: A History*, ed. Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

## Humanitarian Photography and the Spectatorial Nature of Sympathy

The first official humanitarian photograph was taken in 1897 during the Indian Famine, and as such, is where our journey will begin. The photograph first appeared in the July 1897 edition of the *Cosmopolitan* in an article by Julian Hawthorne. The piece begins with a note from the editor which states that the Indian narrative had always been written by the English or by Americans who visited and portrayed India from a certain perspective while avoiding critical issues. The editorial note continues by saying that

Mr. Julian Hawthorne was selected as the gentleman most likely to view things intelligently and fair-mindedly...the mental and physical photographs which Mr. Hawthorne has brought back are pictures of inconceivable conditions. Doubtless, similar horrors have existed in the world's history, but no record has been left sufficiently authentic to bring them vividly to our understandings.<sup>93</sup>

What follows these words is an article that is punctuated with illustrations that were meant to shock and waken a sympathy that had been long asleep and a population that had long been indifferent to the suffering of others. Indeed, examining other magazines of the era, such as the *Christian Mission Alliance*, all share the same tone of disappointment in the general public's lack of sympathy.

In the May 1900 edition of the *Christian Mission Alliance Magazine*, Reverend Mark B. Fuller also included graphic images in his article, perhaps more graphic than that of Hawthorne in that they show dead bodies, shown above, and began his piece by

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<sup>93</sup> Julian Hawthorne, "The Horrors of the Plague in India," *The Cosmopolitan Illustrated Magazine*, 1897.

saying that “it seems a pity that intelligent people should need to have their feelings stirred by pictures,” and concluded his plea for sympathy with, “The sad fact is that the majority of Christians in America do not consider the millions of India worth saving...Dear reader, are these awful things true of you?”<sup>94</sup>

Indeed, in both pieces, graphic photographs of starving people, stripped down to their bare bones, and often contrasted with the healthy, fully clothes colonial figure, can be seen. Hawthorne and Reverend Fuller took the photographs themselves and as such their words are framed around the photographs, which are central to their call for donations. This is surely not a strange sight to the modern viewer who has often been exposed to the naked suffering and death of others.

That these photographs, taken in 1897 and 1899 contain colonial imagery and mentality is hardly shocking. Colonialism still had a firm grip on the world both politically and ideologically. However, what is unsettling is the examination of humanitarian photography of the current era. Upon closer inspection of all humanitarian crises, Syria, Yemen, and the refugee crisis among them, it appears that the colonial imagery and depiction of others still strongly remains. Their death and broken bodies are still used as a tool for fund raising and public engagement amid claims of the spectatorial nature of sympathy.

Yet, this claim is difficult to believe when it is contrasted to the pictorial depictions of humanitarian crises in the Global North, of which there are very few.

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<sup>94</sup> Reverend Mark B. Fuller, "Famine's Ravages in India," *Christian and Missionary Alliance*, 1900.



## **Challenging the Spectatorial Nature of Sympathy**

In order to compare and test the need for the spectatorial nature of sympathy, specifically in regard to images of graphic suffering and colonial era imagery, six instances of recent humanitarian crises were identified. If the spectatorial nature of sympathy is in fact a real necessity for the fund raising and the public engagement that humanitarianism has so long depended on – I would have expected to see the spectatorial nature of sympathy throughout the photographs regardless of the subject.

The crises that I examined fell into three distinct categories: disease, natural disaster, and genocide. Each category has two crises that occurred within the span of a year in order to retain the integrity of time and the ideology of the period. Each category also has Global North and South counterparts.

## **Methodology**

The photographs for this study were selected by identifying the most iconic humanitarian photograph of the crises. I selected the most iconic photographs, because they represent the mental imagery and narratives of the crises for each individual. I determined which photographs of the crises were the iconic photographs in two ways. First, I looked through leading media sources to see which photographs appeared again and again through various forms of media such as television, print, and social media. For this section of the investigation, I relied exclusively on what the general public would have easy access to. I then selected the single iconic photograph by verifying its iconic status in at least three academic articles by relevant scholars.

This examination is not meant to be an extensive study, but rather, a sample of direct contrasts. Similarly, the three categories chosen were selected based on their availability and not because of a theoretical construction. The categories, crises, countries, years, and photographs are as follows:

*Table 2. List of Photographs, category, and year.*

Category	Crises	Country	Year	Photograph Selected
Disease	AIDS in Africa	Uganda	1986	"AIDS Photograph" by Ed Hooper
	AIDS in America	USA	1990	"The Face of AIDS" By Therese Frare
Natural Disaster	Hurricane Katrina	USA	2005	"Tanisha Belvin and Nita LaGarde" by Eric Gay
	Indian Ocean Tsunami	Sri Lanka	2004	"File Photo" by Vincent Thian
Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing	Bosnian War	Bosnia	1992	"Bosnia" by Ron Haviv
	Rwandan Genocide	Rwanda	1994	"Scars" by James Nachewey

## Results

The photographs presented a very stark contrast between the narrative of similar events that took place in different parts of the world. I found that there was indeed a difference in photographic depiction, though the goal of each photograph was the same: humanitarian aid or political mobilization.

The photographs of the Global south continued with the colonial legacy of depicting "the other" as living in a world of chaos and violence, while the photographs from the Global North followed the same colonial patterns that depicted the Western subject as steeped in dignity and power. This was most obvious in the case of the

photographic depiction of natural disasters. The selected photograph from the Indian Ocean Tsunami showed a scene of raw death: a father crying over the body of his dead child and a mother weeping openly, the background populated by a mass of suffering bodies. Meanwhile, the photograph of Hurricane Katrina was a photograph of resilience, dignity, and togetherness. It showed an old woman in a wheelchair holding hands with a small child.

I did a more extensive study using the same categories, though eliminating the time constraint and adding more than 26 humanitarian crises from 1899 to 2019. I did this study to trace the evolution of the humanitarian gaze. These findings were again reproduced: humanitarian photography of the Global South shows graphic scenes of death and suffering, while its counterparts in the Global North did not.

There has been no evolution in the humanitarian gaze away from the imagery of the colonial era or of the social norms put in place during the height of European colonization and use of photography as propaganda.

## **Conclusion**

This finding is highly concerning given that humanitarianism has risen to prominence both on the individual and international levels. Humanitarianism is a social norm that is highly cemented within modern social and international norms, and as such, is a highly valued norm in the micro and macro sense. Yet, it was found that humanitarianism still contains a strong influence from colonialism. By testing this

theory with humanitarian photography, this thesis was able to make tangible the intangible.

Susan Sontag noted that “the more remote or exotic the place, the more likely we are to have full frontal views of the dead and dying.”<sup>95</sup> Sontag argues that this tradition is a remnant of colonial thought and part of the colonial tradition of ethnological exhibitions of which conflict photography is an extension of.<sup>96</sup> Philippa Levine, has argued that the naked body, specifically that of subjects of the Global South and former colonial states, has long been equated with lack of civilization and thus, has long been used in colonial photography.<sup>97</sup> That the majority of the photographs of modern humanitarian crises depict humans in various states of undress is a direct remnant of the colonial norms that stress differences between civilizations.

In *Journalism, Memory and the Voice of the Visual*, Zelizer cites a reaction to the photographs of the 2010 Haiti earthquake: “If this had happened in California, I cannot imagine a similar depiction of half-clothed bodies splayed out for the camera.”<sup>98</sup> This brings back the question that Zelizer posed to her readers earlier in her book: “What does it say when we feel squeamish and protective about the deaths of some, but not of others?”<sup>99</sup> This paper has argued that the answer to this is that the removed viewer, specifically, the Western viewer, has been conditioned to think that their state of reality

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<sup>95</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

<sup>96</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

<sup>97</sup> Philippa Levine, "Naked Truth: Bodies, Knowledge, and the Erotics of Colonial Power," *Journal of British Studies* 52, 1 (2013).

<sup>98</sup> Barbie Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public*, Oxford, (Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>99</sup> Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public*.

and their “normal” is in constant conflict and suffering. As such, photographs of “their” suffering are not the same as photographs of “our” suffering.

The trouble with showing such death and destruction is that it runs the risk of alienating the emotions of the viewer from what they are looking at.<sup>100</sup> There are some images of violence can repulse and are unrecognizable. For a photograph to be universal and produce meaning at an individual level but also penetrate the collective level, it must play with a delicate balance of art, violence, and silence. They must be photographs that create space for reflection. The photograph must create what doesn't appear in the photograph: the before and after. That, the invisible action of the story, is left to the imagination of the viewer. If the viewer cannot look at the photograph for its violence, the viewer is not going to think about the before or the after.

This observation recalls Barbie Zelizer's argument that suffering is not depicted in equal terms, and also begs the question as to how this stark global divide can be, especially given that humanitarianism, a strong ideology in the modern world order, stress equality and dignity for all. Judging from the photographs, only one part of the world is afforded dignity and the other is stripped of it.

There are several answers for this: first, fund raising and public mobilization depend on graphic scenes of suffering; second, it is a morbid aspect of human nature that enjoys the sight of suffering;<sup>101</sup> third, colonialism bled into humanitarianism and

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<sup>100</sup> Kari Anden-Papadopoulos, "Body Horror on the Internet: US Soldiers Recording the War in Iraq and Afghanistan," *Media, Culture, and Society* 31, 6 (2009).

<sup>101</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*.

humanitarian photography, in its inequality, is a direct and tangible expression of these lingering colonial ideologies and social norms.

All three of these answers are viable and valid. The goal of this thesis was not to come to a concrete answer but to view the problem from a new perspective and from the constructivist lens. By doing so, it was found that colonialism has found a space in the modern era of humanitarianism, and that this is directly materialized in humanitarian photography.

The final section of this thesis will discuss the implications of this finding by examining two modern cases of humanitarian crisis: the Yemeni Civil War and the Syrian Refugee Crisis.

## CHAPTER 3: PICTURING THE LIVES OF OTHERS: YEMEN AND SYRIA

### Introduction

In this chapter, I will examine the implications of my findings in the previous chapter. I will be examining in two modern cases: the Yemeni Civil War and the Syrian Refugee Crisis. I wanted to see what the existence of the historic humanitarian gaze means in evolving and modern conflicts and situations.

Historically, photographs have had the power to change the world. The efforts of the Vietnam War, for example, was greatly affected by the emergence of photography into the everyday lives of the American people. The photography, specifically “The Terrors of War,” by Nick Ut, and the daily televised aspect of the war allowed for a space in which it entered into the daily narrative of the American life. The photographs of Emmett Till also acted as a catalyst to the Civil Rights Movement. Photographs have the power, this goes unquestioned. Humanitarian photographs, taken with the direct goal of public engagement and fund raising, have always created the space for dialogue and outrage.

## **Amal Hussain and Alan Kurdi**

Photographs from the Syrian Refugee Crisis and the Yemeni Civil Wars are among the most graphic and emotionally charged humanitarian photographs that the world has yet been exposed to. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a worse situation. The photographs coming from the ground show extreme destruction, human suffering, and in many cases, show real death. Yet, these are not new depictions of life in the Global South and certainly not new of the Middle East.

The world has now entered a new phase of humanitarianism, one that is still struggling to define itself. Humanitarianism is entangled with official organizations, states, the media, and the public. All four have important parts to play in this new iteration of humanitarianism. Past humanitarianism has been defined by volunteerism, nationalism, intervention, and R2P. This version, with some of the worst humanitarian crises in recent history, is struggling to find its footing and its individual identity.

The only constant through time seems to be humanitarian photography.

Two photographs from these conflicts stand out as universally iconic: that of Amal Hussain and Alan Kurdi. The photographs both carry the necessary elements needed for humanitarian photographs to serve as a catalyst for both fund raising and public mobilization: aesthetic quality, opening the viewers imagination, and prior political knowledge. They also carry the additional weight of depicting suffering children. However, what is interesting is that both photographs, particularly the photograph from Yemen, hardly made a dent at all, and have failed to make a lasting, real international and political impact. Their impacts were seen immediately in the



resulting public emotional outcry, however, once their emotional charge faded, in about a week or so, there were no more political actions taken.

Yet, these photographs had all the markings of ones that could make a difference. They were aesthetically composed. The photograph of Amal Hussain by Tyler Hicks, in particular, was composed in such a way that it emulated classical art from the Renaissance or European Masters. These artworks, already burned into the consciousness and collective memory of the Western world, carry an emotional charge and religious undertones. That the humanitarian photographs are just that and not art and therefore works of the imagination and depict reality and carry values of truth, adds to its narrative value and transcends art to lived collective memory.<sup>102</sup> By photographing the reality of the war, Hicks constructed and narrated the suffering<sup>103</sup> and violence for those who, until the moment they saw the photographs, the war had been in a strange purgatory: somewhere between the real and the imaginary. By providing a face, that of Amal Hussain, Hicks made the reality real. His photograph of seven-year-old Amal Hussain shows her bare bones and discolored hair. Her expression is peaceful, almost tired, and resigned. It is a haunting photograph made up of warm colors and single subject.

The photographs of Hussain and Kurdi also opened the imagination of the viewer as to the events that led to the moment that was photographed. The photographs, just an instant in time, lend themselves to questioning of the entire series

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<sup>102</sup> Verity Burgmann, "The Importance of Being Extreme," *Social Alternatives* 37, 2 (2018).

<sup>103</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

of events. If one moment and person is real, then other moments and other people must be real as well. Barbie Zelizer, author of *Journalism, Memory, and the Voice of the Visual* describes this imagined before and after as a tension “not only about the precise moment that the image depicts, but also about all the moments that led up to that instant and all the moments that follow.”<sup>104</sup> It is in these quiet moments of contemplation and reflection that various other culturally constructed truths and anthologies of images <sup>105</sup>come to mind and construct the gaps that the individual photograph leaves to the viewer.<sup>106</sup> Images, for example, that depict the dying, are the most “celebrated”<sup>107</sup> of humanitarian photography, due to the pornographic and “morbid side of human nature”<sup>108</sup> allow for more space for imagination and construction than depictions of the already dead, and thus are more effective at capturing the public’s attention.<sup>109</sup> Humanitarian photographs that allow for this space to imagine and think are proven to be more effective than those that “repel, frighten, or even stigmatize.”<sup>110</sup> Yet, as has been shown in the previous section, this depiction of the dead and dying, is something reserved just for the Global South.

The photographs also contained political context in the public arena. Yet, in order for humanitarian photography to serve as a catalyzing moment, the public must

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<sup>104</sup> Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public*.

<sup>105</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*.

<sup>106</sup> Burgmann, "The Importance of Being Extreme."

<sup>107</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

<sup>108</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

<sup>109</sup> Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public*.

<sup>110</sup> Lisa M. Skow and George N. Dionisopoulos, "A Struggle to Contextualize Photographic Images: American Print Media and "the Burning Monk"," *Communication Quarterly* 45, 4 (1997).

be already aware of the political contexts of the situation, connected to it, and genuinely regard it as an exception.<sup>111</sup>

Susan Sontag says that photographs alone cannot create a moral position, but they can increase public revulsion.<sup>112</sup> In order to elevate from the emotional to the political, there must be “relevant political consciousness” and familiarity.<sup>113</sup> Otherwise, no matter how graphic a photograph is, it easily loses its emotional charge and the viewers become anesthetized to images of suffering, and instead of serving as vehicles to change, become mere tourists of reality<sup>114</sup> who are now acutely aware that “terrible things happen.”<sup>115</sup> This, in turn, serves to construct cultural narratives and normalize, and thus ignore, situations of war, human suffering, and death.

In both the cases of the humanitarian photographs from Yemen and Syria, these standards were met. Political awareness existed, and reality was known of, just not yet seen in a tangible format. Upon the production of humanitarian photographs that both played to human nature and political awareness, a catalyst should have been born that closed the distances of lives realities and left no more room for collective imagination that could easily be pushed aside in favor of centralized, micro realities.

The photographs in question are both of small children.

The first, a photograph of Alan Kurdi, shows “Kurdi lying face down in a sleep-like position on the beach near the water line. Within hours, the images were

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<sup>111</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

<sup>112</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*.

<sup>113</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*.

<sup>114</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*.

<sup>115</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

dramatically diffused”<sup>116</sup> and gained worldwide attention and “relief organizations experienced a surge in donations and citizens offering resources.”<sup>117</sup> The photograph was spread mostly through social media and then the news media quickly followed suit. Research done by Oxfam shows that immediately after the photograph of Alan Kurdi was released on September 2, 2015, there was an incredible spike in social media dialogue about refugees.

The spike lasted for approximately two weeks before dramatically falling again. It rose once more in mid-November of 2015 to the same level as before. This is most likely in s response to the November 2015 Paris terrorist attacks as perpetrated by ISIL. It has been the narrative that refugees from Syria are not to be trusted in the fear that they are terrorist cells, so this backlash and support to refugees around the time of the terrorist attack is to be expected. However, after the initial emotional responses, the mention of refugees and migrants on Twitter eventually stabilized to pre-Alan Kurdi levels. The chart below shows the spike in “refugee” Google searches in the United States. It spikes exactly on September 2, 2015, then again on November 15, 2015, and once more on January 29, 2017 when President Donald Trump issued Executive Order 13769, the “Suspension of Issuance of Visas and Other Immigration Benefits to Nationals of Countries of Particular Concern.”<sup>118</sup> The countries and people of particular concern?: “those who engage in acts of bigotry or hatred (including “honor” killings,

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<sup>116</sup> Thomas Olesen, "Memetic Protest and the Dramatic Diffusion of Alan Kurdi," *Media, Culture, and Society* 40, 5 (2018).

<sup>117</sup> Olesen, "Memetic Protest and the Dramatic Diffusion of Alan Kurdi."

<sup>118</sup> President Donald Trump, Executive Order Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States, (2017).

other forms of violence against women, or the persecution of those who practice religions different from their own) or those who would oppress Americans of any race, gender, or sexual orientation."<sup>119</sup>

The second photograph, of Yemeni child, Amal Hussein, shows her severely malnourished body, ribs exposed, chest caved in, discolored hair, and an expression of resignation on her young face. This image, with its victim feminization,<sup>120</sup> composition, and content, should have had a significant impact in the collective consciousness of the American people, on sight alone. Instead, it traveled around newsfeeds and was met with mild curiosity before being scrolled away and tucked into the files of yesterday's news.

The two images, and the thousands of other images from the conflicts, met the aesthetic, and the human imagination requirement. They did not, however, meet the political or the familiarity requirement. On the contrary, the familiarity requirement that they did fill was one of a negative cultural narrative that severely impacted their ability to act as a catalyst. The pictures, and the imagined stories that they implied, were expected. Emmanuel Adler describes this expectation as a social fact, which becomes one only by human agreement and perpetuation.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Trump, Executive Order Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States.

<sup>120</sup> David Campbell, "Cultural Governance and Pictorial Resistance: Reflections on the Imaging of War." " *Review of International Studies* 29 (2003).

<sup>121</sup> Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics."

## Cultural Narratives, the Empathy Paradox, and the Colonial Legacy

Cultural narratives surrounding the Arab world revolve around a constructed narrative of perpetual violence, destruction, anger, suffering, and death. These constructions, often deviated from the actual lived realities.<sup>122</sup> But, by presenting this unceasing view, it further constructed a normalization and an idea “which [affects] physical reality” and not merely reflecting it.<sup>123</sup> From this construction comes perceived reality that plays out on all levels of life and are built from “collective knowledge, institutionalized in practice.”<sup>124</sup>

In order for humanitarian photography to work it must be seen as a genuine exception.<sup>125</sup> Without this exceptionality, these views of the lives of others are seen as the reflection of reality, or “a crude statement of fact addressed to the eye,” that, in turn, inspires feelings of indifference.<sup>126</sup> These images then serve as a cultural anesthesia.<sup>127</sup>

Humanitarian photography from the Middle East, and other states outside of the Western reality, show scenes of such violence and suffering that the viewer disconnects it from reality. This “full frontal violence” is a common practice when it comes to the photography of attitudes that have become baked into the collective knowledge of Western viewers.<sup>128</sup> This spatial and cultural distance “lessens the impact, and in the

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<sup>122</sup> Nasser, "'Biblication' in the Service of Colonialism: Jerusalem in Nineteenth-Century Photography."

<sup>123</sup> Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics."

<sup>124</sup> Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics."

<sup>125</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*.

<sup>126</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

<sup>127</sup> Campbell, "Cultural Governance and Pictorial Resistance: Reflections on the Imaging of War." "

<sup>128</sup> Zelizer, *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public*.

process, the media has created a public which has learned not to care much"<sup>129</sup> and simply "reproduce traditions of cultural representation."<sup>130</sup> This Verstehen of the media, has international physical implications.<sup>131</sup>

In addition to these constructed narratives that exist and are continuously repeated, there is a major phenomenon that has taken a firm hold on modern populations: The Empathy Paradox.

The Empathy Paradox is facilitated by social media and the feeling of the world able to access one another through online social interactions.<sup>132</sup> This increase in self-focus has been directly linked to a decrease in the focus of others.<sup>133</sup> Coupled with a decrease in civil engagement, distrust in the media and others,<sup>134</sup> constructed negative cultural narratives, general social disengagement, a breakdown of cultural intersubjectivity, this modern reality has allowed documentary photographs that would have, in another time, or perhaps simply just from another place, fulfill its role as a catalyst moment. Instead, the United States and other Western nations have taken a firm stance against granting asylum to refugees from the Syrian Civil War.<sup>135</sup> Instead of stepping up to help those in need, the United States has drastically reduced the number

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<sup>129</sup> Campbell, "Cultural Governance and Pictorial Resistance: Reflections on the Imaging of War." "

<sup>130</sup> Michaels Griffin, "Media Images of War," *Media, War, and Conflict* 3, 1 (2010).

<sup>131</sup> Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics."

<sup>132</sup> Sara Konrath, "The Empathy Paradox: Increasing Disconnection in the Age of Increasing Connection," *IGI Global* (2012).

<sup>133</sup> Konrath, "The Empathy Paradox: Increasing Disconnection in the Age of Increasing Connection."

<sup>134</sup> Konrath, "The Empathy Paradox: Increasing Disconnection in the Age of Increasing Connection."

<sup>135</sup> Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "Trump to Cap Refugees Allowed into US at 30,000, a Record Low," *The New York Times* 2017.

of refugees admitted to the United States to a mere 22,000 in the fiscal year of 2018, the lowest it has been since 1980.<sup>136</sup> The actual number of refugees from Syria is perhaps more alarming a number to visualize: 62 in the fiscal year of 2018, when it was still one of the worst refugee crisis' humanity has yet known. This shows the physical representation and repercussions of ideas and collective, constructed knowledge.

The main problem of colonial imagery and the colonial legacy in humanitarianism is that it continuously emphasizes the world into two categories: us and them. It casts the Global North in the role of protects because of its natural superiority, and the Global South as a perpetual victim of its own innate shortcomings. These photographic representations of "them" have not wavered in nearly 200 years. The photographic representation of "us" has not either. These perpetual, cyclical ideas have very real, material consequences. They become further ingrained, pain and suffering further normalized, cast aside, and ignored as just the reality of the way that life has always been.

There is no denying that there is very real pain and suffering. There is no denying that children are starving in Yemen and that lives are being destroyed in Syria. There is no denying that something must be done by those who, for whatever reason, are in the privileged position to help. What can be denied, however, is the perpetuation of the narrative – that graphic images of suffering are needed to mobilize the public, to shame politicians into action, and to waken individuals to the plight of others. If dehumanization is not needed for the Global North, then it is certainly not needed for

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<sup>136</sup> Davis, "Trump to Cap Refugees Allowed into US at 30,000, a Record Low."



the Global South. The days of state colonialism are over. The time has come to break the chains of mental colonialism as well. Revered Fuller, in 1900, said it best: it is a shame that the world needs to be woken with violence.

Yet, the fact remains that something must be done to help wherever it is needed. The fact also remains that the public is now numb. The photographs no longer work, if they ever truly did. The colonial narrative and the depiction of others has completed its purpose: to divide. So, how change this?

My solution is simple: Let them tell their stories, let their voices and inside knowledge of themselves and their culture determine their narrative. The world is a pluriverse and no voice is too small to not be heard.

## CONCLUSION

In times of crisis, words sometimes fall short and only visual representations of reality can fill the silence with stories of those who are far removed from our own reality.<sup>137</sup>

Humanitarian photography, for all its current faults and gaps that it creates, carries a single instant of truth. To see a photograph is to see a moment, a person, or a fraction of an event. The context may be unknown, but there are certain facts that are etched from light and certain existences that can no longer be ignored once the various realities meet and overlap.

This thesis has shown several things. First, it showed that colonialism, far from being a system of the past, has instead transformed and merged and has quietly installed itself in humanitarianism. Secondly, it showed that this idea of superiority over others can be materialized in the form of humanitarian photography, as well meaning as it may be. Third, this thesis has shown the material consequence of such ideas in two modern cases of humanitarian crisis that have remained largely ignored.

It is my thought that once presented with an idea it is impossible to forget it. This, in many ways, is like humanitarian photography. Once you see someone's lived reality, they become real to you. The thought is that once the public has seen the suffering of others, they will jump to help in any way that they can. I have argued that

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<sup>137</sup> Meryl Alper, "War on Instagram: Framing Conflict Photojournalism with Mobile Photography Apps," *New Media and Society* 16, 8 (2014).

colonialism has a firm grip on humanitarianism in an attempt to waken the mind to the existence of such ingrained social norms and cultural narratives. By doing so, I hope that these ideas can be shed and that these representations of others can evolve from a singular perspective into a more holistic view, with the inclusion of various voices. Fault does not in any way fall on humanitarians or humanitarian photographers. Their quest is a noble one: to show the world the suffering of others in an attempt to help. Nor are humanitarians and humanitarian photographers solely responsible for this perpetuation of cultural narratives and for carrying colonialist ideologies. There are other sectors of society that carry this as well. Yet, humanitarians and humanitarian photographers are the people who carry humanitarian norms. Humanitarian photographers are the embodiment of such norms made tangible for all to see. It is they who should lead the charge away from perpetuating the colonial imagery of the past. Like I said in section one, when you live in the present and are surrounded by social norms, you are blind to your own actions and ideas. Like the present has exposed the inequalities of the past, this thesis has wished to expose the inequalities of the present so that they have no place in the future.

Humanitarian photography has always carried great power. They carry the power to mobilize, to shame, to empathize, and to make real. They remind us of our own fragility and the preciousness of life. They remind us of our own positionality and privilege, and exactly there is the problem. By situating ourselves in a position of individual power over a mass of suffering others, it has also served to further divide.

Humanitarian photography must shift and show not only the suffering of others, but also the joy, the spirit, and the humanity of others as well.

States do not live in isolation but rather largely depend upon the power and ideas of its people to dictate its actions upon the world stage. Norms can exist from the top-down, but they can also be built from the bottom-up. Even if the humanitarian behavior of some states is largely performative, this shows that it is indeed a norm that is valued to the individuals of the state. Norms require pressure to be materialized and perpetuated and embodied. It is up to the people to continue to act as the norm enforcer so that states embody humanitarian norms. The age of humanitarianism is not over, as some have argued. It is just beginning.

This paper has shown that ideas are not abstract but rather, are tangible in lived reality and have real repercussions that determine the lives of ourselves as well as the lives of others that exist beyond the realm of our being. Ideas and perceptions are consequential. They have weight in the material world, and they shape real events and consequences.

*Eastern Ghouta Woman*, by Syrian photojournalist, Abdulmonam Eassa, is one of my favorite photographs. The first time that I saw it I was sitting at a café in the 18<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris, swiping through articles for an earlier iteration of this thesis. I remember being struck by it because it was like no other conflict photograph that I had ever seen before. It had something that was familiar but also strangely out of place in such a scene: dignity. It was then that I materialized my shock at the dignity in the photograph that I realized that I carried cultural narratives within me. I carried

stereotypes and preconceived notions and mental images of people and countries. That my mind had been shaped by a system that I had I played no part in but was actively perpetuating by seeing others from the position of a Westerner. I realized that my interior world was made up of images that I had no control over, rhetoric that I was blind to, and thoughts that I thought were my own.

I have always been interested in my own interior world and have always tried to materialize it. As a photographer, a poet, and a painter, I have done a lot of thinking about this. To me, writing is a direct transfer from the mind to world. You can see the intricacies of thought and watch as it evolves and develops. Photography is a mechanical reproduction and is therefore a direct way to see the world as a photographer does, not the world as it is. Quite literally, what the viewer is seeing is the world from the point of view of the photographer. Painting is an expression of the dream world, a part of humanity that far too often ignored. I have done a lot of thinking about humanity and its various dimensions. How a person is not an isolated event, but rather is a culmination of billions of years of evolution, of ideas, of culture, interaction, and adventures. Humans are made up of the lives of others. Like humanitarianism, humanity has evolved and is in a new phase, one that is still finding its footing and is looking for what will define it.

The photograph that so inspired me was taken by a Syrian photographer, Abdulmonam Eassa. It is a photograph of his home, Eastern Ghouta. It presents the Syrian Civil War and its casualties from a new perspective. There are elements of

familiarity and home entwined with a sadness and loss that can only be the result of real love and connection.

It shows a woman and child amid the ruin. The woman, dressed in black has her face covered by a niqab and wears dark sunglasses. She holds her daughters' hand and in the other, an elegant handbag. She walks with dignity and a quiet elegance, her back straight, looking not at the camera but at something or someone beyond our view. Her child looks at us, not crying or in pain. She has her own handbag. They're strolling around their ruined city and as I look at them, I'm filled not with pity but with hope. They will rebuild. They will recover. I feel certain of this. Their lives are full of blood, but they will persevere.

This is the gaze that should exist.

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